

NEW ZEALAND STORIES.

The Passing of Nat.

A TALE OF THE NEW ZEALAND KAURI BUSH.

(By H.T.G.)

[The Editor desires to announce that New Zealand Stories by New Zealand writers, will be published on this page regularly. The page will be open to any contributor, and all accepted stories will be paid for at current rates. Tersely, brightly sketched of Dominion life and people, woven in short story form, are required, and should be headed "New Zealand Stories."]

IT does not take long for a new-chum among the Kauri to learn that all humanity gathered beneath the shade of that monarch of pines may readily be classified into two distinct species. First, the Bush Cook; second, everybody else! "Cookey" is unique, while the ordinary mortals who depend upon his camp-oven skill may be subdivided into the many recognised varieties of toiling mankind.

Nat Fallows was no exception. He was, as usual, the very personification of inconsistency. Though cross-grained and cynical, he thought nothing of sitting up half the night to rub painkiller into the sinews of a lumbago tortured mate. He was uneducated but widely read, bony and wrinkled, yet spry as the best of us. In fact, Nat was at once philosopher and drunkard. His knowledge, as gauged by the public school syllabus, would hardly have sufficed him to gain a primary certificate, but I have known him to clench more than one argument with a quotation from Locke's "Human Understanding!" Ruskin, Bacon Carlyle were his playmates, for he would spend his leisure hours with well thumbed copies of their works for company, whilst such historians as Froude, Prescott, Napier, and Kinglake were regarded by him as personal friends!

His past was, of course, a mystery. The Kauri shelters many mysteries! When on rare occasions he let slip a few words concerning the "days gone by," our inquiring looks would portray our curiosity, and Nat would hastily change the subject, and not even the tempting bait of a bottle of rum would induce him to refer again to what he had said. Despite his few cantankerous ways and his ever ready sarcastic remarks, we all respected Nat, and some of us loved him with that strange affection possessed only by men who carry their lives in their hands as they go forth to earn their daily bread. Nat knew how to use his fists too, and that accomplishment counts for much in bush camps! Woe to the green-horn who willfully offended our cookey. I have seen his long bony arms shoot out with meteoric swiftness, and his astonished opponent would carry the trademark of Nat's horny knuckles for many a day, as a reminder that dexterity in the noble art may command respect where social standing fails.

Perhaps the best side of Nat's character was his hatred of any sign of disrespect shown to womankind when he indulged in wild yarns and doubtful conversations. This rather exceptional trait became almost a mania with him, and though we never quite understood its

cause until the end, we studiously avoided any unseemly reference to the gentler sex when Nat was present, and I think the old fellow appreciated this consideration of his feelings.

I do not for a moment suppose that his real name was Nathaniel Fallows, but otherwise the details here set forth to record his romance in real life are correct, for one must believe a mate when he speaks in dead earnest, and when truth rings out in the clear crisp statements, and glances from the memory-searched appeal of tear-dimmed eyes, eyes that may melt with womanly softness when the past claims the thoughts, but which glare with the rage of the unclothed man of old, when the merest word of chance may scratch the venter of civilisation and expose the untamed cheler of Unreason lying dormant beneath!

Nat had just returned from the Bay, his clothes wet through, and his whole body quivering, partly from the effects of sleeping out for two successive nights in the soaking wet ti-tree, but more as the result of indulging in Murphy's sly-grog whisky, a nameless brand of fiery and tissue-destroying tanglefoot that cost a day's wages per quart bottleful. The old man allowed us to help him into dry garments, but when we offered him

fried damper and billy-tea, he promptly refused, for alcohol and an appetite do not agree. He would not even join us in a game of euchre, for he had "blewed" his month's cheque, and Nat would never "gamble on a mortgage."

"No, boys, I'll turn in," he said. "Bunk is the place for me. I'll turn in, and dream of Edgar Allan Poe, and graveyards, and the rattlin' of bones!" "No you won't Nat," said Cam Joyee, "You come along to the fire first, and get warmed up a bit before you go to roost!"

"Come along now," added the warm-hearted bushman as Fallows showed signs of hesitation. Cam was a sort of leader in our camp. He had the happy knack of saying the right thing at the right time, and of doing the right thing at the right time, too. He led our shivering "cookey" to our huge earthen fireplace, where a blazing pile of tawa and dead manuka sent out that cheery glow of warmth so welcome to those in melancholy mood.

"Why, ye're shivering like a—like a—" said Joyee, hesitating for a suitable term of comparison.

"Like a epileptic blong-monj, eh, Cam?" prompted Nat, as he sank wearily on to the inverted candle box, our only form of seat. Cam threw a bush rug over the old man's shoulders, and returned to his game of euchre, while Nat searched in the zinc lining of the wooden chimney and drew from its niche a favourite pipe—an ancient and blackened clay dudden through whose abbreviated stem the owner had drawn many a "Derby" dream of striking the winner of the Melbourne Cup.

"Queer, I can't co-erce these here footy matches!" he muttered, vainly endeavouring to strike a wax vesta, and his shaking fingers presently sought a live coal for a pipe light. To have lit a match for him would only have provoked a torrent of abuse, for like most seasoned old boozers, Nat resented any obvious show of sympathy, and only swore in response to persistent offers of help.

"Confound you, Morgan, shut the door," he said querulously, as the one he addressed looked out at the weather. Morgan was an inconsequent youth, a new hand at the screw-jack and the rolling road; he had once defied Nat, and took a week to recover from the effects thereof.

We finished our hands at cards, and somewhat dismally drew our packing-case seats to the fire, whilst outside the howling wind and the beating rain threatened to demolish our frail shanty. The Boss, a decent sort of fellow whose contracts never paid, drew out a bottle, whereat Nat gleefully smacked his lips, but when the pannikin clattered against his teeth, he swore at the palsy.

"Thanks, Mister Rhodes," he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve and glancing round the room as he passed the bottle round. He was considering whether or not he would "give us a pitch," so we quietly smoked and waited, apparently paying no attention to him. Our policy of silence was soon rewarded, for after an obvious effort and much fumbling with matches and pipe, Nat began:—

"Now, you boys, you look melancholle! I expect it's the indigestion, caused by the bad cookin' during my furlough. I dunno, but I'm thinkin' maybe it feels like near time that my mortal coil began to shuffle itself off o' these old bones. Anyway, it's time my yaarn was spun. Nat Fallows is as dead to the outside world as a defunk morepork, and you chaps see that he remains so. Shut that openin' in yer head yer calls a mouth, Morgan, and listen, all of ye, for I don't expect the chance'll come again. . . . Way back in the early days, I wasn't exactly what ye might call one o' the Sunday School teacher type of animal, and at one particular time, when Her Majesty's officials was a little too official and officious for my likings, I found it advisable to seek retirement in the leafy solitude of the bloomin' bush. Ain't that a poetical way o' puttin' it, Cam? The Morris knew me well. I uster help 'em a bit when they were sick, you know, and in my temperrairy embarrassment this kind hearted beggars passed me on from tribe to tribe, and though they knew I was "wanted" for a plain unvarnished case o' murder, they never even hinted at yielding up my corpus for the sake o' blood money. And that's what many white folks wouldn't have done, neither. The value set on my devoted head was five hundred quid—just the value of a healthy bet at a toney race meeting! But after a bit, when things toned down considerable enough, I worked my way back to civilisation, such as it was in



A JOY RIDE.—A.D. 1912.